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THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN: LOUD AND SILENT EMERGENCIES

In the last decade, war has killed over 1.5 million children, maimed another 4 million, forced at least 5 million into refugee camps and made more than 12 million homeless. About half a million children starved to death or were killed in armed conflict in 1992 alone.

While such "loud emergencies" have claimed so many innocent lives, 250,000 children die each week of malnutrition and vaccine-preventable diseases in what UNICEF calls "silent emergencies" throughout the developing world. For each of the 35,000 children who die every day, many more live on in such poor health that they will never grow to their full physical and intellectual potential.

Neither loud nor silent emergencies are acceptable in a civilized world. Once we know how to relieve torment and fail to do so, we become tormentors ourselves, wrote Primo Levi. The international community, however, is showing increasing commitment to stop the abuse, neglect and exploitation of children.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child – which was adopted unanimously by the 44th United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 – represents such a commitment. The Convention is based on the principle that the State has a legal obligation to protect children and help parents and communities provide for their well-being. It elevates children's needs to the level of rights, codifying them to make them enforceable. There was previously no comprehensive legal umbrella to protect the world's children. The Convention stresses "the best interests of the child", and rejects all forms of discrimination based on sex, race, colour, language, religion or ethnic origin.

After its adoption in 1989, the Convention came into force with more than 20 ratifications less than a year later. It has since been ratified by more than 130 countries. No other human rights instrument has gained such quick and widespread support. In addition, the Declaration and Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children, signed by 150 Heads of State or Government, set goals for the survival, development and protection of children.

The Convention recognizes the special vulnerability of children and spells out their civil, political, economic and cultural rights. It includes adequate living standards among survival rights, and protects development rights such as education, access to information, play and leisure, cultural activities and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It prohibits all forms of cruelty and exploitation, arbitrary separation from family and abuses in the criminal justice system. It embraces children's participation rights, including the freedom to express opinions, have a say in matters affecting one's own life and play an active role in society.

Pressing issues, some of them addressed for the first time by an international convention, include obligations to children in special circumstances, such as refugee children (article 22); protection from sexual and other forms of child exploitation (articles 34 and 36); drug abuse (article 33); children in trouble with the law (article 40); inter-country adoptions (article 35); children in armed conflict (articles 38 and 39); and the needs of disabled children (article 23) and the children of minority and indigenous groups (article 30). The needs of these vulnerable groups are to be given special attention at the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993.

The Convention is more than a collection of legal articles; it is a practical tool for improving the situation of children everywhere. However, the Convention cannot by itself tackle the serious problems affecting millions of children. Formal political commitment is necessary if the Convention is to be implemented at the national level.

Children in armed conflicts

The horrors of war fall heaviest on the young, but the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child comprise a substantial body of international law for the protection of children in wartime.

Civil war in many countries often destroys families and disrupts services. Children become indirect victims, their development seriously compromised when food is no

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longer available, schools and health clinics close or are destroyed and such basic services as immunization are terminated. In developing countries, where most of the wars have been fought since 1945, such deprivations are compounded by poverty, drought and disease.

Children have also been made targets or agents of war. They are recruited, kidnapped and forced to bear arms and participate in combat. In recent years, an estimated 200,000 children below 15 years of age have been enlisted in armies and trained to kill. The Geneva Conventions specifically preclude participation in warfare by any child under 15 years of age. Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits the recruitment of children under 15, and article 39 requires "all appropriate measures" to be taken to heal physical and psychological wounds and promote the child victim's reintegration into society. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stressed the need for preventive measures, such as education for peace and sensitizing the military.

UNICEF introduced in the late 1960s and continues to promote the concept of "zones of peace" to assist children. In El Salvador, Lebanon and the Sudan, it negotiated cease-fires between warring factions so that children could be immunized. Every year for the past seven years in El Salvador, three days have been set aside as "days of tranquillity" to allow thousands of children to be immunized. As the lead agency for Operation Lifeline Sudan in 1989, UNICEF created "corridors of peace" between antagonists to deliver food, vaccines and other relief supplies.

Since 1989, the end of the Cold war, the World Summit for Children and the growing acceptance of the Convention have provided a new context for action to prevent the brutalization of children in armed conflicts. UNICEF is working to ensure that the World Conference on Human Rights will take advantage of this historical opportunity to take steps to deepen international commitment to the rights of children.

The girl child

More than half of school-aged girls in the developing world drop out before completing primary school. Women in many cultures are valued only for their roles in child-rearing and domestic work, roles for which little or no education is necessary. However, everyone benefits from educating women and girls. Girls with skills and knowledge in health, nutrition and sanitation grow to become women capable of contributing to sustainable development.

According to UNICEF Executive Director James P. Grant, the "apartheid of gender is the cruellest and most pervasive discrimination of all". Yet, he observes, this has not yet generated a sustained condemnation on a global scale. "More than a million girls die each year simply because they are born female", he pointed out. "If the new world order is to usher in a just world, then this apartheid of gender, too, must go. And for that to happen, girls' education must be seen as a critical empowering tool."

Discrimination against women begins in childhood, with cultural and social attitudes conspiring to give the girl less than that which the family and society offer her brother. It is usually the boy who gets most of what is available – food, maternal attention, health care and education. In South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, more boys are immunized against disease, and more girls die of measles, diarrhoea and respiratory infections. Boys are also breastfed longer than girls, who often eat last and least. The deeply entrenched preference for boys in many societies encourages neglect and exploitation of girls and lowers the status of women as, robbed of her self-esteem, the girl child eventually becomes the role model for her own children. Poverty compounds the problem. In rich and poor countries alike, the majority of the poor are women and children.

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